

# ROCKY MOUNTAIN HIGH

In search of solitude in the American Southwest, **Richard Grant** takes a drive from Phoenix to Denver through the vast open ranges of northern Arizona, the Utah canyonlands and the Rockies

**O**n the way out of Phoenix, I bought five gallons of water, 12 Mexican beers, a bottle of bourbon, coffee, oatmeal, cans of beans, a Styrofoam ice chest, a miniature camp stove and a tin cup. Everything else I needed – tent, sleeping bag, coffee pot, knife, spoon – was already in the back of my rental car. I took off my watch, turned off my phone and buried them in the bottom of my suitcase.

Now I was ready. But the city didn't want me to go. It trapped me on rush-hour freeways. It blocked out the sky with enormous billboards of smiling TV presenters, discount accident lawyers and magnificent-looking cheeseburgers. On the radio, I found a show called Six O'Clock Stoner, which played The Rolling Stones and commercials for local defence lawyers specialising in drug cases. Finally, with Mick Jagger yowling *Jumpin' Jack Flash*, I was able to stomp down the accelerator and break free.

Two hours later, I was sitting by a campfire in the mountains near Flagstaff, cold beer in hand, moon rising through the pine trees, tension draining away from my shoulders. Deadlines, family worries, airports, insomnia, machines and screens, news and advertising – goodbye for now. I stood up and looked around: no other campfires or artificial lights in any direction. I rolled out my sleeping bag next to the fire and made a pillow from two sweatshirts. Gazing up at the stars, I fell into a long, deep sleep for the first time in weeks.

At dawn, there were elk moving through the trees, coyotes yipping and yammering in the distance. I made coffee and studied the map. My only commitment

was to drop off the rental car in Denver, 1,000 miles away, and there was no hurry to get there. An inviting swathe of the American Southwest lay before me – northern Arizona, the Utah canyonlands, the Colorado Rockies – and it was hard to think of anywhere better in the world for a freewheeling, soul-healing trip with plenty of camping and hiking and solitude. I would avoid cities and towns, bathe in rivers and restrict my dealings with humanity to petrol stations and roadside attractions.

I dropped down out of the mountains on to the high Painted Desert of the Navajo reservation. 'Step inside nice Indians', read the handwritten sign at Chief Yellowhorse's highway souvenir stand, but sadly it was closed. I drove on past rock formations that looked like camel heads, elephant feet and wedding cakes, while dust devils whirled across the red plains like miniature tornadoes. Some people find desert landscapes harsh and alienating, but I saw a kind of raw, invigorating purity, and a humbling reminder of how old the planet is and how recently it produced us. Further up the road, behind a sign reading 'dinosaur tracks', I stood over the three-toed footprint of a velociraptor, embedded in the mud 160 million years ago and preserved as the mud turned to rock.

The famous buttes, monoliths and spires of Monument Valley were obscured by a howling orange sandstorm. They loomed in and out of focus, according to the ebb and flow of the wind, and so did clumps of Navajo cattle, standing with their bony rumps to the storm. I crossed the state line into Utah and filled up with petrol in Mexican Hat, an outpost named after a big sombrero-shaped rock on a neck of sandstone. At the Valley of the Gods, less well known than Monument Valley but almost as spectacular, I went for a walk. I gazed up at the towering rock formations. The Navajo



looked at them and saw warriors frozen in stone. Mormon pioneers, arriving in the 19th century, named the formations Setting Hen, Rooster Butte, Lady in a Tub and Seven Sailors.

You're allowed to camp in the Valley of the Gods without paying a fee or asking anyone's permission, the way I like to camp, but wood gathering is prohibited because the vegetation is so sparse. I wanted a campfire for company so I drove up an improbable road called the Moki Dugway. Hacked and dynamited into a cliff face, it tops out on Cedar Mesa, an elevated tableland that overlooks Monument Valley and the Valley of the Gods on one side, and a huge canyon called Grand Gulch on the other. Here there were abundant junipers and pinyon pines, a pair of golden eagles in the sky and any number of places to pull over and camp.

As the world knows, a great deal of hoot and blather about freedom emanates from America. The natural response, especially for Europeans, is to roll the eyes and dismiss it all as empty rhetoric. On the other hand, where else in the world can you roam around at will in such vast expanses of uninhabited public land? In the American West, there are a million sq miles of public land, a patchwork of national parks, monuments, forests, protected wilderness and open ranges like this, where ranchers graze cattle and visitors can do almost anything they please. My agenda: watching the sunset, heating up chilli beans, feeding juniper wood into my fire and drinking whisky from a blue tin cup.

**Utah.** A word about the Mormons of Utah. They are a polite, friendly, hard-working people who have proved themselves wonderfully adept at building communities in this harsh landscape. Sadly, they have not excelled in the culinary arts. After an all-day hike in Grand Gulch, followed by a dip in the San Juan river, I went into the best-looking restaurant in the small town of Blanding. Fifteen minutes later, I abandoned a 'Mexican' platter that tasted of nothing but microwaved, chemical-laden cheese. Further up the road, browsing a Mormon cookbook in a petrol station, I came across a recipe for chicken Aloha, which has just two ingredients: a frozen chicken breast and a can of pineapple chunks. I resolved to stick to beans and oatmeal until Colorado.

If you like weird roadside attractions, it's hard to beat Hole 'N'

the Rock south of Moab. Using only hand tools and dynamite, one Albert Christensen managed to excavate a 14-room house from a monolith of solid rock, and it has been preserved exactly as his wife Gladys left it when she died in 1974. Al was a keen amateur painter and taxidermist and the house contains multiple > portraits of Jesus and Franklin Roosevelt as well as various ineptly stuffed animals, including a piebald donkey with his face all sagging and twisted and his ears poking up through an Easter bonnet. What the tour guide blushing denies, and the old-timers in Moab insist is true, is that Al and Gladys used to run a brothel in the house trailers behind the rock.

Moab and the surrounding area was busy with tourists and mountain bikers, so I took myself off into the La Sal Mountains for more solitude. I was hiking ten to 15 miles a day, starting to feel lean, strong, fit and healthy. But as I discovered in the rear view mirror the next morning, I looked like a wreck – grimy, dishevelled and weatherbeaten, with a sunburnt nose, cracked lips, greasy hair, and something gone slightly feral in the eyes. I craved good food but I still wasn't ready to sleep under a roof.

In Fruita, Colorado, I stopped for breakfast and was dismayed to learn that I had just missed the Mike the Headless Chicken festival. In 1945, a Fruita farmwife lifted her axe and chopped the head off a four-month-old cockerel. The bird wobbled off and then regained strength. She started feeding it by pushing cracked grain down its neck. With a stage name of Mike, the headless rooster went into showbusiness, travelled the country as a sideshow attraction, made the Guinness Book of Records and lived for four years and three months after his decapitation. In Fruita, they celebrate his achievement every May with live music, beer, headless chicken suits and lawnmower races.

That night I camped at 10,000ft in the Rockies, using my tent for the first time and worrying about bears. There was frost in the morning and shivering over my coffee I saw a cow moose browsing the streamside willows just below my camp. I spent the day in Rocky Mountain National Park, hiking through meadows full of wildflowers and beaver ponds, and getting a queasy altitude headache on Trail Ridge Road. I got out of the car at 12,000ft in a world of rock and ice, tundra and marmots. I gasped my way up a snowfield, slipped and fell. I had come far enough.

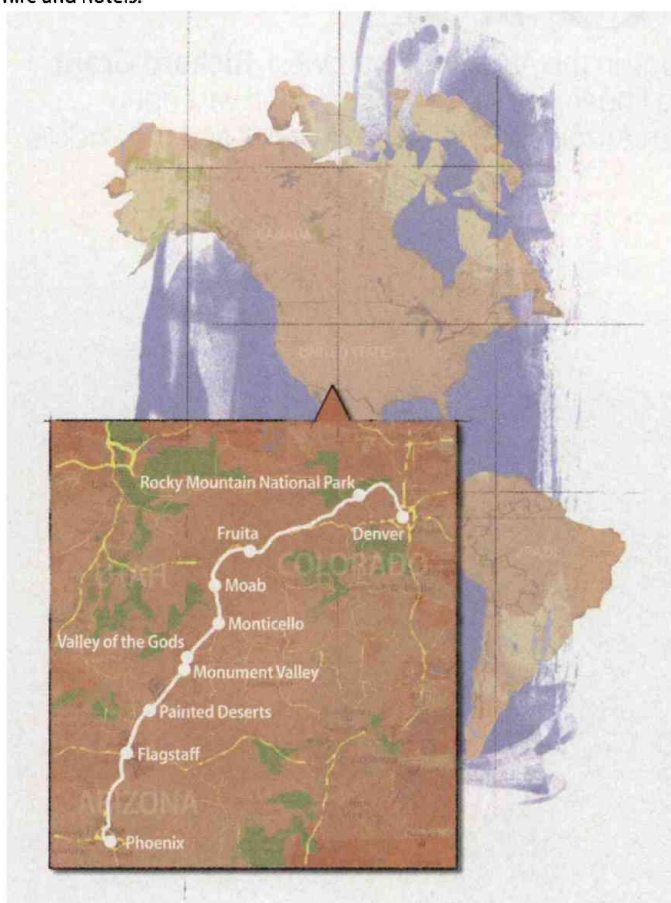
Then came the long winding drive down to Denver, the big sprawling city on the plain. I checked into a hotel, took a long hot shower, put on my last set of clean clothes and headed with some dispatch to Panzano's, an Italian restaurant downtown. Now it was time for grass-fed veal scaloppini with lemon and capers, mashed potatoes and sautéed spinach, fresh-baked breads, the miracle of wine. Civilisation and wilderness, I decided between forkfuls, are the perfect complement to each other. Who else in the restaurant was experiencing such joy and pleasure? Who else would even remember their meal a year from now?

#### WAY TO GO

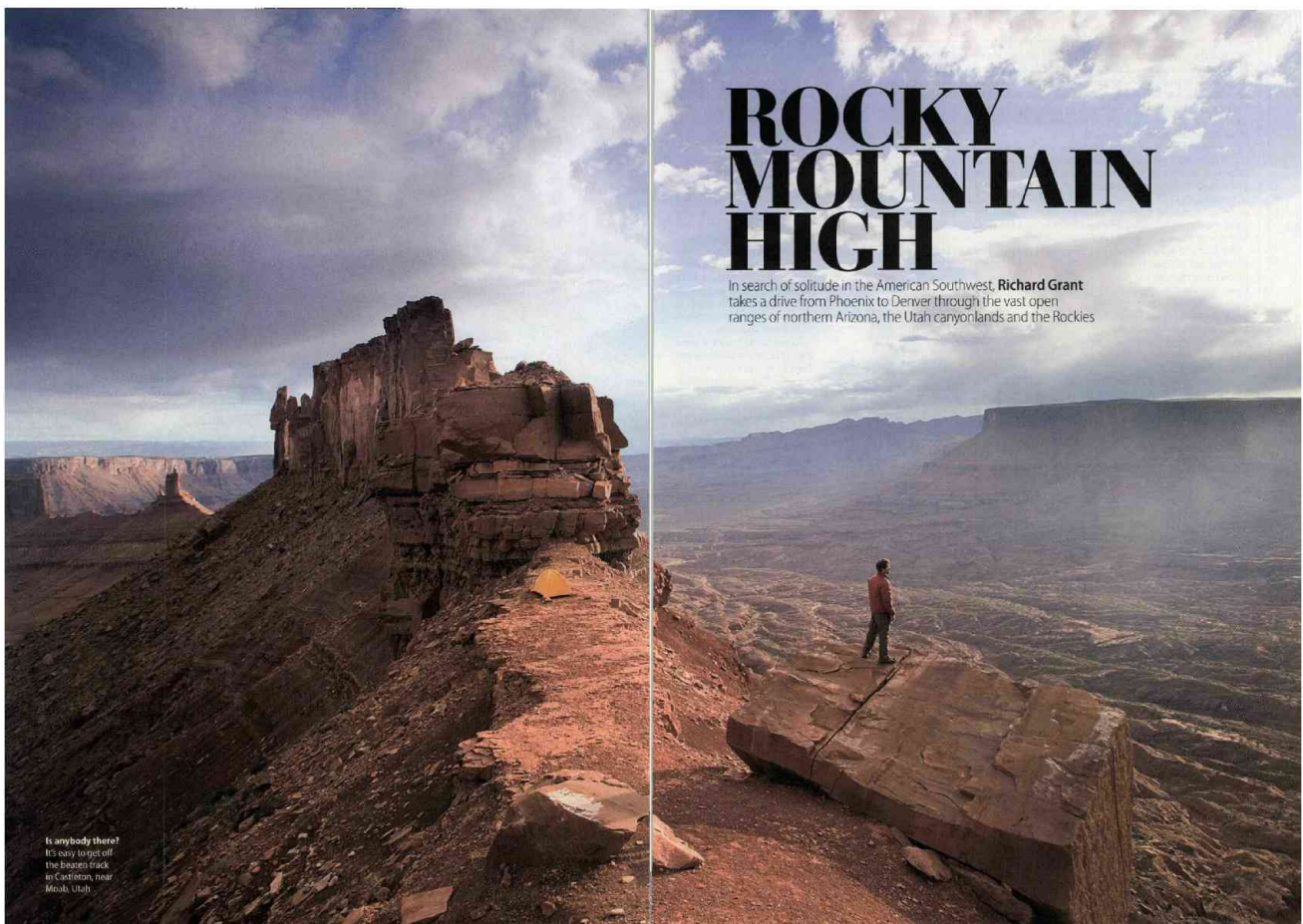
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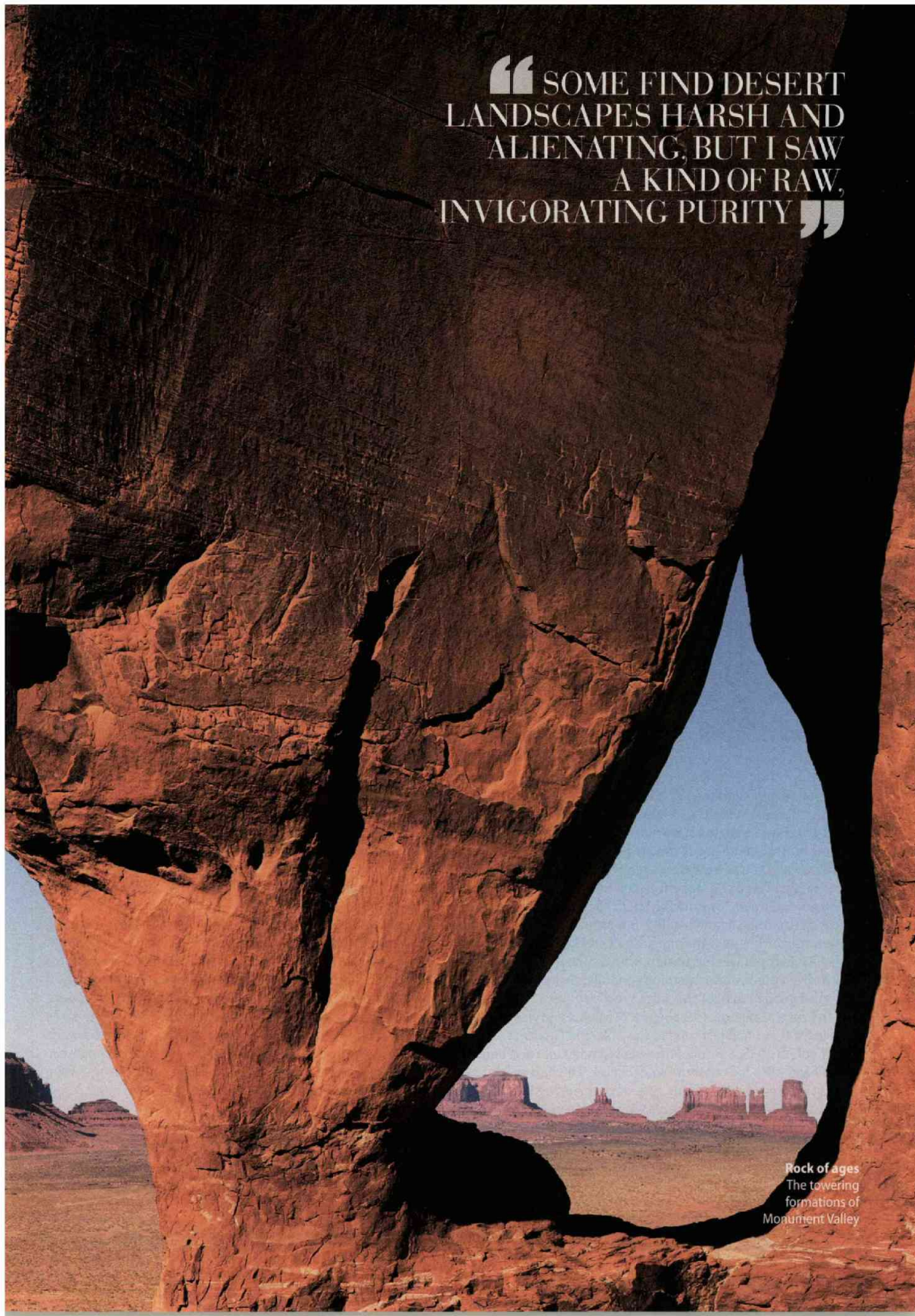
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**Peak drive**  
The Trail Ridge  
Road takes visitors  
12,000ft up into the  
Rocky Mountain  
National Park